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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH LAO WOMEN'S UNION
PRESIDENT ADDRESSES LAOS' TIER 3 RANKING

REF: VIENTIANE 571

1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador met with newly-elected Lao Women's Union (LWU) President Sisay Leudetmounsone July 6 to discuss Embassy cooperation with the LWU across a range of issues. The LWU has played a prominent role on TIP issues, and Ambassador used the occasion to explain Laos' recent Tier 3 ranking and suggest areas where the Lao could take steps to improve their standing. President Sisay, who was aware of our TIP Report, suggested the LWU would be willing to work with the Embassy and, as a starting point, would meet with a visiting G/TIP official later this month. Sisay pointed out other positive developments: the LWU women's shelter, funded jointly by UNICEF, the Japanese government and The Asia Foundation (TAF), was up and running, the government had just issued a Presidential Decree on implementing the 2004 Women's Law, and the National Committee on Anti-Human Trafficking had recently met. The LWU is one of the lead GoL agencies on TIP; Sisay appears to be as committed to the issue as her predecessor, who has taken the reigns at the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare. End summary.

2. (SBU) Ambassador described to President Sisay the Embassy's long record of cooperation with the LWU, especially through USG-funded projects implemented by LWU partners like TAF and, more recently, with the Academy for Educational Development (AED) on Avian Influenza. TAF, in particular, had enjoyed an extremely close and productive relationship with the LWU, helping the Union construct a women's shelter, the first of its kind in the country, in conjunction with UNICEF and the Japanese government. Over nearly a decade, TAF had worked with the LWU in providing training for women in a variety of areas, had been a partner in drafting and disseminating the 2004 Law on Women, and had assisted the LWU on its TIP strategy.

3. (SBU) Although the LWU had been at the forefront of TIP efforts, the Ambassador reminded Sisay, other parts of the GoL had been laggard, with the result that this year the G/TIP office had demoted Laos to Tier 3 ranking -- partially a result of the GoL's inability to show serious efforts on prosecution of traffickers and protection of victims. A senior official from the State Department's G/TIP Office would visit Laos later this month to discuss recommendations for Laos to follow on trafficking, and she hoped the LWU would be able to meet with him. Sisay was familiar with the ranking and indicated she understood the TIP Report critique. She took issue with the ranking overall, however, and claimed that the government had been making serious efforts; its failures were of omission, not commission. As an illustration, she said there had been a number of

prosecutions of traffickers, but unfortunately details were sparse because of the inherent difficulties in collecting information on cases from provincial courts and police.

¶4. (SBU) Sisay told Ambassador that one manifestation of Lao intentions regarding trafficking was its passage of the 2004 Women's Law. This law had been slow to be implemented, but earlier this year the President had finally issued implementing regulations for the law in the form of a Presidential Decree. This decree would allow the law, with its many sanctions against trafficking, to be put into effect. This would in turn have an impact on the government's ability to prosecute traffickers. On protection of victims, the LWU now had the Women's Shelter, which was finally up and running, providing for out-patient counseling services for victims of trafficking and domestic abuse and short-term accommodations for women, and their children, who had no other place to turn.

¶5. (SBU) Sisay also said the Lao government's National Committee on Anti-Human Trafficking had met recently, the first time since the body was set up two years ago. She hoped this would be the start of a continuous effort at the national level. She said she welcomed the visit of the G/TIP official (Senior Reports Officer Mark Taylor) to discuss recommendations for moving Laos off Tier 3. Sisay said she would be happy to meet with him to discuss the recommendations.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Tier 3 ranking appears to have galvanized the Lao to an extent we had not anticipated. Interlocutors at both the LWU and the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare have generally welcomed establishing a dialogue with us to discuss their ranking, and are tangibly more willing to share

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with us what they've been doing on TIP than they were before our report came out. The recent cabinet shakeup may help as well: the LWU's former President, Onechanh Thammavong, has moved over to become Minister of Labor and Social Welfare. Onechanh has been closely engaged on TIP efforts and her presence at the MLSW should be a fillip to that office's TIP work. Sisay is new to the LWU's Vientiane office, but came here from Champassak, where she headed the provincial LWU for many years. Champassak is a point of origin of many Lao migrants to Thailand, and is in the front line of the TIP issue. Sisay brings to the LWU substantial experience on TIP. End comment.

¶7. (SBU) On a biographical note, Sisay is an up-and-comer whom we would definitely rate as one of our more personable interlocutors. Born in Salavane province in 1959, she is an ethnic Katang who moved to Champassak at the age of 9 and has spent nearly all her life in that southern province. She worked her way up through the provincial education department and LWU; she was for many years a teacher of science at the Teachers' Training School in Champassak, and in 2005 was named Director of the Provincial Education Department. She served two terms, from 1998 to 2006, as a National Assembly representative from Champassak. Relatively unknown outside the province, in March she was elected to the Central Committee at number 48 in the 55-member body, one of only four women represented at that level of the Party. Unusually, she is single. She speaks some English.

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